

Interview with Kathryn Mitchem  
12/10/24  
Recorded by Beth A. Richardson

**Beth Richardson:** When did you know you were gay? Was there anything about your growing up life that you would like to talk about?

**Kathryn Mitchem:** I have often said that my parents were way ahead of their time, and it was comments from them when I was around junior high age, that let me know that I was lesbian. In the years following that, when I said that to them, they couldn't figure out what it was they said. They weren't aware of particulars. But somehow conversations with them made me know that [being lesbian] was one of the options that was perfectly okay. They simply were glad for me to figure out whoever and whatever I was and they were totally supportive of that.

And not just for me. I know I picked up that kind of message from them because they were part of the small support system for one of their high school friends who was gay. Merle Miller, the author and playwright, one of the first people who died of AIDS before they knew what it was.

Anyway, way back in high school before my parents were even married, they were very supportive of this classmate. Mother was a journalist at the high school newspaper. When this gentleman was in adult years, his family was totally unaccepting of him. It was our house where he would come and stay when he came back home to visit.

So the fact that my parents were so accepting and were so much a part of his support, I grew up just knowing that was that was how we were to live. I lived in this atmosphere of support.

So that was what I learned early on. And it wasn't until much later that that I learned that upbringing was very unusual. And it was very unlike most people's experience. And that's why I often said, much later, during Affirmation meetings and that I knew I hadn't paid my dues. I hadn't paid my dues because I did not experience what most of my friends and colleagues did. I never was ostracized from church, from family, from job.

Probably one of the strongest examples of my sharing that was the year 1984 when Affirmation started the Reconciling Congregation Program. We were in worship there in Baltimore. I think it was a Jeanne Audrey Powers who was leading us in a worship experience. (I'm not sure my memory's right.) But she gave us opportunity in the worship to speak about who had been the strongest supporters. And like most times when things like that were said, I didn't say anything. And finally, when she asked one last time, I did stand up and say that it was my parents who had been the most supportive. I was reluctant to say

that there were because I often felt that my story was very different from that of everyone who was there with so much pain

And then, Morris Floyd (who you know, he can look very stern) -- he stood up and then he just said, "Kathryn, I don't want to ever hear that you don't tell your story again. We need to hear that it not only *can be different*, but it *has been different* for some people. And then he sat down.

So I've tried to be less reluctant to share my story ever since. Morris had a way of saying what ought to be.

**BR** - You mentioned Affirmation. When did you find Affirmation or how did that happen?

**KM** - Well, I my parents and I were present at the General Conference in 1972 in Atlanta, when the first pejorative words were put in the Discipline. My parents were there as alternate delegates from the North Central Jurisdiction, and I lived I was real close to Atlanta at that time.

So we were sitting there when that legislation passed and I knew that Michael Collins was there. You know the way that convention centers were set up at that time. There were big curtains around wall. Michael and Gene Leggett were rendezvousing in one of those little places. I went and found them and began to learn of what they were thinking, the possibility.

And so then it was just a couple of years later that I came to Scarritt as faculty and Nashville was the first places for that they came -- both to Edgehill UMC and, I think, to Belmont UMC.

I just happened to be at the right place at the right time to be aware of the organizing that they were doing. So in a sense, I became a part of what became affirmation as soon as membership was offered. I don't even remember what the processes were. If I hadn't been in Nashville, I might not have been aware of those early stages of organizing, but so I was just there from the beginning.

**BR** - When I was looking through the papers that you're going to send to the new archives, there was a folder for Nashville Affirmation and there was a charter documentation that was signed by Tim Tyner. So you were in on the first of that. Do you know how the Nashville group got started?

**KM** - The national organizers held some of their meetings at Ed Stant's house when they came to Nashville. I don't even remember exactly whose idea it was or how we began to meet monthly at Edgehill and formed the Nashville Affirmation. I don't remember what year and I don't remember who had the first idea. I don't know if I did or if Ed Stant did ...

**BR** – Pat Floyd’s name was on some of the papers. And this is where my story comes in because I was a youngster and so my girlfriend at the time -- Mary Boyd and I made up flyers and we snuck into Methodist churches and put them on the bulletin boards.

**KM** – [Laughs] I remember that ...

**BR** -- There wasn't an Internet.

**KM** -- Yes, yes, yes. And my memory is that as we were doing that, there were other groups in Nashville like the Episcopal group. We began having some meetings together, occasionally. I can remember did that on a regular rotation basis. We would attend each other's meetings or come all together.

**BR** – So you mentioned meeting Gene Leggett and Michael Collins in 1972. Did you start attending the national meetings at that point?

**KM** -- What year was General Conference in Indianapolis?

**BR** -- 1980. That was the first one I went to.

**KM** -- Well, I didn't go to that. This is one of those decisions that you look back on and say there was no reason for that but ... I was with Leanne Tigert then and we decided that we shouldn't both go -- that just one of us would go. And so she went to that.

But then whatever was probably the first national meeting after that general conference. I started going then and missed very few all the years that we had national Affirmation gatherings. And my memory was that at first it was more than once a year, that Affirmation got together.

**BR** -- Wasn't it twice a year?

**KM** - Yeah, yeah, yeah. So it that I have no memory as to where that meeting was, where the first one was that I went to. But that's when it would have been.

**BR** -- Do you have any memories or stories about meetings that stood out at you?

**KM** -- I'm memory is that they were wonderful and it was powerful wherever we were meeting. I remember the meeting in California when the whole upheaval happened over the men and the women and the language stuff and all of that.

But my memory is more of the good things about all of our affirmation meetings and not the times when there was a disagreement about something. That's not what stands out in my mind. And the fact that at most of those meetings and we were staying in each other's homes and not in some hotel or something. I can remember that was our first meeting of

Karen Oliveto, way back when she was just a pastor in a local church. We met in her church and some of us got to stay in her house.

**BR** – So you became a leader in Affirmation, you do you kind of have a memory of the decade of when you started serving?

**KM** - No I have no memory of that at this point. And I served more than one time at the council. I was kind of was one of the retreads. I have no memory as to how many times that I served on the council.

**BR** – I do remember -- probably it would have been in the 80s -- that you were serving on the council. They had the names of the council, but then they had “A Lesbian Woman who can’t be named” -- which was you.

**KM** - Yeah. That’s right. And I don't know that it was necessary, but at least I thought that it was necessary to do that. I was working at Global Ministries. That was where my connection was. After I left Scarritt, I was a staff person, field staff with the Church and Community for 15 years. So that was in 88. when they closed Scarritt.

And of course talking about meetings, I remember the time we met here in Nashville and the Ku Klux Klan got wind of us. We were on the front page of the Banner and that we were having meetings at Scarritt as well as Edgehill. And the president of Scarritt had our backs, so to speak. I don't remember exactly, but he really spoke in support of us and in support of having us meeting at Scarritt.

**BR** -- Didn't the Klan call Scarritt? And it was on a weekend and there was just the one security guard.

**KM** -- Yes. Because all of our meetings were usually weekends. That was when we could meet. I remember the meeting in Atlanta one time and it was at St. Mark's United Methodist. They had such beautiful banners inside and out of the church. That's one of the meetings that stands out just because of all the banners everywhere.

**BR** -- So then you were one of the behind-the-scenes workers in the Reconciling Congregation Program National Office. That's one of the memories that I have of is checking the mailbox for the reconciling program. It was RCP at that time.

**KM** -- And of course, it was the Nashville Affirmation group that did all the mailings. We were the hands-on workers when the newsletter was ready to go out nationwide. Why we were the hands-on people sorting all the bulk mail.

**BR** – That was before email. [laughs] Well, the other thing is, the first reconciling banner, you and I made. The one that had a black background. I have a picture of it somewhere, but that hung in Edgehill for a very long time and it had the first version of the logo, which had

the pink triangle and the cross and flame with the vine. Then we couldn't use that logo because of the Methodist lawyers reached out to us. But maybe we did that one that's there now, too?

**KM --** Oh yes, I think so. We had something to do with it. I don't remember exactly,

**BR --** But that's the old logo, too?

**KM --** Yes, it is. I was going to say we really -- we did not follow the lawyers. [laughs] But it was the rainbow, the vertical rainbow was the was the difference in that. And so that one gets carried out every year for the pride week or times that we have the several churches now that table together. No.

**BR --** So this is a bunny trail, but Deen Thompson remembers the first year of gay pride. And the church council had been worried about Edgehill being there. I don't know if they said, don't take the banner, or if they just said we shouldn't have a presence. But Deen had a key to the church. So he went and got the banner and took it to to gay pride. Which is a good thing to have the keys to the church.

**KM --** And what I remember maybe because I was more involved was that for many of the early pride weeks, we help we organized what was called church night, a religious night, where several different churches would be part of. I don't recall if it was organized like a worship service or whatever, but we took the lead in that for a number of years, every year for the pride week.

**BR --** And I don't remember when that started. We could probably find you in National Pride starting, because that would have been the date, you know.

**KM --** And at least at least for several years, some of us also were a part of the overall planning: planning the picnic for families. That was one day highlighting families and one day the religious. So it was like the whole week, we had something highlighted each day.

**BR --** It's is so amazing how different it is now, you know, from those days. So it's crazy, isn't it?

**KM --** And I can remember this is afterwards, but part of the making sure the history was recorded and kept for the city. I can remember one year when somebody in in the city level planning invited me and was it Deen [Thompson] and interviewed us about the early years of pride week. We went to some office down there south of Scarritt.

**BR --** So the history is somewhere.

**KM --** I don't know what was done with it. It seemed to me it involved filming us with video as well as audio recording of some of the early history.

**BR --** So at some point, you started helping a lot at General Conferences.

**KM --** I was the manager of the coalition office. And I don't know how many years I played that role. I went to general conference just to do that. I didn't attend the sessions. We had a had a schedule for all the volunteers. I worked out a schedule, organized the office in terms of workspaces, and decided how long the office would be open. What time we opened in the morning closed the night. At first it was just the office of Affirmation and Reconciling Ministries. But then as the years went by, it became a coalition office.

**BR --** What would happen in the office during the General Conference

**KM --** I wish my memory was better, but what happened was a lot of planning. We had workspaces where small groups could plan all the layout for the daily handouts that we did. Whoever was editor of that was in there working so there was space for that to be going on.

We had to the big copy machine for all the copying. Everybody who had copying to do -- we had to sometimes schedule that.

Some general conferences, we used the same space for the lunchtime presentations that would be done. But other times it was in a different space. It all depended on what we could arrange and how large the office was or whether we needed more separate spaces for the speakers that we lined up for lunchtime. I don't remember having responsibility for lining up that kind of thing, but just for making sure of the space that was needed people needed.

**BR --** One of the the boxes of files that's going to go to the archives is all that information. And it was it was very appropriate to send it to the archives -- because had printouts of emails.

**KM --** Oh, so I kept everything apparently

**BR -** Which is great -- the archivists are going to love it. You have done a lot.

**KM -** Well, I did it with a lot of other people. It was always a part of group working on all of these things.